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„body turn“ – how many „turns“ does „the body“ tolerate?

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The topic of this CESH-congress is „*Corpo e senso del limite*“ - in English „Sport and a Sense of the Body's Limits“. In both versions, the term „corpo“ resp. „body“ seems to denote the actual, really existing human body, the material form of our lived existence. There is a great debate, whether the biological aspect of the body is dominating other facets like the social or the aesthetic, for example. In sport science, the biological aspect seems to be dominating as a matter of course.

For me, a mechanistic body-concept can not be the guiding one. When I explore the history of sport, I cannot ignore the fact, that men and women performing sport have been and still are human beings with feelings, opinions, thoughts, desires, wishes, relations, commitments, and so on. The material form of our lived existence is of course of biological nature, but inseparably connected with - or better: containing - immaterial aspects. In short: **I have my body, and I am my body.**

My presentation will offer some remarks on the basic terms, give an example of the difficulties with real body-turns, criticise the theoretical approach of the so-called body-turn with its ambitious wording, and suggest a skeptical and unpretentious dealing with the concept of body.

In German, there are two words denoting „body“. „*Körper*“ is derived from the Latin „corpus“. „*Leib*“ is derived from the old Germanic „*leiba*“ and/or „*lif*“, in modern English: „life“ or „live“! Already by this etymological circumstance, it is obvious, that the German term „*Leib*“ has more connotations to all aspects of our lived existence than „*Körper*“. The term „*Körper*“ in my opinion is poorer than „*Leib*“. The English wording for „*Leib*“ is „lived body“ - thus adopting the vivified connotation, in contrast to „dead body“. Some British sociologists (e.g. Turner and Shilling) know and use the German term „*Leib*“ to enrich the semantic field around „body“. ¹

I do wonder, why just in the German sport-scientific discourse of all, the English word „body“ is used increasingly in the poor sense of „Körper“, and I wonder, what might be the meaning of the formula „body turn“.

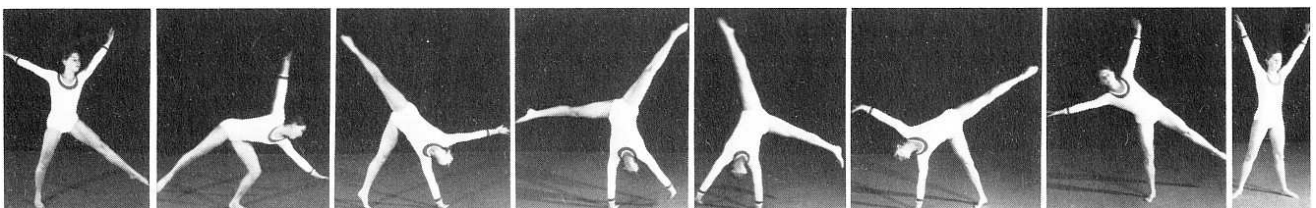
„Body turn“ is hinting at other so-called „turns“ in humanities, starting with the „linguistic turn“ since the middle of the last century, followed by several other proclaimed „turns“ like the „cultural turn“. Even in historical science „body“ is picked out as a supposed theoretical concept.

The very first of those „turns“, the „linguistic turn“, indicates a development in language-philosophy, shifting the interest from the level of objects and their meanings to communication about them. The „linguistic“ philosophers start from the matter of fact, that everyone has his/her own understanding of words, because the attribution of meaning is subjective. So (!?) they no longer ask what the world *is*, its *essence*, but how it is *described* or *attributed* by means of language, by *communicating* about it. But essential questions about the nature of the world are primordial and still remain to be clarified. Things and circumstances are and stay as they are - despite being named differently by different people. They may be differently named by people, but not „constructed“ - they just exist.

Admitting subjectivity in the individual views, I have to check the respective actual understanding when communicating with somebody else. All humans, even scientists, must try and are able to understand each other exchanging their respective understandings about the objects of their science by offering clear concepts and definitions expressed in ordinary language, arguing while open to other points of view, staying curious.

Let me start my line of thought simply with body-turns in a *concrete* sense: rotations of human bodies.

In my university courses in gymnastics, I often started as follows: I asked the students to *turn a wheel* or do a cartwheel, still better, several in a row. This they did more or less ade-



quately. I then asked them to turn wheels starting with the other hand, to the other side. Many students found this already very difficult.

After that, I increased their sensorial-motor confusion by asking them to do different cartwheels in a row, one left and one right, and again left-right. This task was too much for almost everyone, even after I personally had demonstrated this exercise. Most of the students, despite considerable difficulties, bravely tried, even when this caused very strange movements. We all laughed a lot.

Afterwards, I analysed this experience with my students. Besides motor skills and coordinative abilities, fundamental social issues were to be picked up. My students were to learn from this task, how anyone may feel who *has to learn something completely new*.

I wanted to confront the students with that, how schoolboys and -girls may feel in traditional lessons of physical education, to encourage their empathy and to trigger their awareness of this as future teachers.

Of course, I just referred to the words „body turn“ only in a concrete way: In gymnastics, turns (rotations) of the body around its three axes play a major part. By the way, the German word for gymnastics is „*Turnen*“, and the common etymology with the English “to turn” (and the French „*tourner*“) is obvious.

Today, the cartwheel as a tricky little motion is no longer this natural. Even for those, who can do the wheel in its simple form, it becomes an almost impossible challenge, if *one more turn* (the more a turn around a different body axis) is added. To turn two wheels, right and left in a row, even for experienced gymnastics was not at all easy. Nobody succeeded at the first push. One more turn of the body overstrained almost all of them. I presume, that there are *some resemblances to theoretical turns*.

Given the flood of literature on „body“ and „*Körper*“, Robert Gugutzer rightly asked, whether the inflationary use of the „turn“-metaphor could still be taken seriously.² My main question is, whether the so-called „body turn“ fosters gaining knowledge, and if so, which?

There have been some turns of the „*Körper*“- respectively „body“-concept in German cultural history, which I will refer to briefly.

The first turning point was in the late 19th and early 20th century, when, in addition to gymnastics („*Turnen*“) and sports, in Germany a „corporeal culture movement“ („*Körperkulturbewegung*“) emerged.³ The Nazis carried out another fateful turn preferring the term „corporeal education“ („*körperliche Erziehung*“).⁴ The surprising fact, that this „poisoned“ term was used in the GDR continuously, even as the title of a scientific journal („*Körpererziehung*“), seems problematic, too. In western Germany, right up to the sixties, there were various so-

lutions going back to the terms of the „Kaiserreich“ and „Weimar Republic“ like „physical education“ („*Turnunterricht*“ and „*Leibesübungen*“), soon leading to the all-persuasive and dominant „sport“-concept. No sooner that this change was implemented in the 70s of the last century, the so-called „Return of the Body“ („*Wiederkehr des Körpers*“) was proclaimed.⁵

The „return“ of the term „*Körper*“, though „poisoned“ by the nazis not long before, and its integration into the newly developing „sport“-science, was successful, because it no longer denoted the concrete body but served as an abstract *theoretical concept* or „*construct*“. This signifies a philosophical resp. linguistic problem.

I'll quote a lucid passage about wording in the theoretical field:

„Naming at times becomes a substitute for questioning (...). A name is not an explanation, yet the names we give processes and the theories constructed of those names at times extend far beyond the evidence from which they arose. (...) The temptation to coin new words for theory is always risky, and one risk is that it hides an inability to be sufficiently clear about new thinking so as to be able to express it in ordinary language.“⁶

This insight was addressed to fellow-scientists in a different realm, but it fits to sport-science as well.

Since the 1990ies, some articles and books indicating the beginning of a „body turn“ even in German sport history have been published.

1993, Hajo Bernett called the transfer of the „body“ approach to sport historical investigations „a fiction“. He polemized against Rudolf Müllner's talk of „making the fascist body“ („*Faschisierung des Körpers*“), arguing that one cannot localise an abstract concept like fascism in „the body“ but at most in „personality“. ⁷ At this point, I do agree with Bernett, but explicitly *not* concerning his polemic against the fascism-concept.

„(The) Body of the Nation“ („*Körper der Nation*“) was the title of Svenja Goltermann's doctoral dissertation, published 1998, subtitled „Formation of Habitus and the Politics of Gymnastics 1860 - 1890“. ⁸ Her attempt to „apply“ Pierre Bourdieu's habitus-concept to a sport-sociological and -historical investigation does not seem fruitful to me. The approach of organising and interpreting concrete historical events and contexts by means of a general sociological category, not only failed *in this case*, but is questionable *in general*. Methodologically, the horse must always be bridled the other way: from the concrete to the general.

Regarding the so-called „body turn“, even Gugutzer 2006 admits that it is only „partly reality, partly a task yet to be completed“⁹. He discerns three levels of scholarly approaches to the „body turn“ that are variously developed in German sport-sociology. As an *object of re-*

search, „the body“ has been well established for years. On the level of *building a social theory*, Gugutzer detects only rudiments. On the level of *epistemology*, he finds important deficiencies.¹⁰

In my opinion, we can benefit from Anglo-American authors, such as Bryan S. Turner and Chris Shilling.¹¹ They show, that lucid considerations are not only possible regarding the body as an object of research, but also on the level of building a theory and of epistemology.

The term „body“ („*Körper*“), in *German* publications is mostly referred to in the singular form. The *singular* often indicates a switch from the concrete to an *abstract* meaning of the term. Historians and sociologists can look at people in the past and present and talk and write about their visible, real *bodies* - mind you, in the *plural*. If they talk about „the body“ of people in the generalising singular form, this is to be viewed skeptically.

The first critical turning point, for me, is using the term body in the singular form as an *abstract concept* like e.g. „the body of the male Greek athlete in antiquity“. This generalisation does not refer to real persons, even if the word originally denotes a real, *concrete entity*.

Another critical turn occurs, when the singular-generalising word refers to an *abstract entity* like „fascism“, which Bennett already criticised.

In addition, without a precise concept of „body“, everything remains unclear. In recent German sport-scientific publications, I found no exact definition of „body“, nor of „sport“.¹² In a recently published sport-sociological handbook-article entitled „Body- and Motion-Practices in the Sport of Modernity“ („*Körper- und Bewegungspraktiken im Sport der Moderne*“), I found a statement such as „the body of industrial work becomes increasingly irrelevant“. Together with the following explanation „the work in the *media society* requires not primarily physical strength“, the author implicitly reduces the body concept to „physical strength“. In this contribution, Gabriele Klein also coined many neologisms like the cryptical term „industrial body-machines“.¹³

Each new approach first and foremost has to show its potential for producing new evidence. Remember the confusion of *naming* and *explaining*!¹⁴ Some contributors to the fashionable „body“-discourse act as if they merely by wording already could harvest insights. In my opinion, by means of self-critical and thorough tilling, the soil must first be *prepared* for sowing or planting.

„Body turn“, in my view, is (still) an *overtwisted concept* - at least one (theoretical) turn too much. An unperturbed *re-turn* would help - „*doucement*“! - „*piano*“! Clarifi-

cation of the key terms is necessary, in particular of „sport“, „culture of human motion“, and „body“. ¹⁵ As a sport-historian, I won't accept and apply any paradigm before it has proved to be intellectually useful.

There is no need for a strained sporting competition of *pretentious labels* like „body turn“. Social science as well as sport science can and should be patiently and consistently enriched and developed by integrating new insights on the basis of the „lived-body-concept“, renouncing spectacular newly labeled approaches every ten years (or so). The theory of „*embodiment*“, as delineated by the British Shilling and Turner or the German Alkemeyer¹⁶, may be a promising approach when integrating results from the neuro-sciences, psychoanalysis and philosophy. It seems that in our lived body there are complex *preconscious* capacities and abilities which might be described as „*wisdom*“ of the lived body.

In conclusion, I want to introduce my personal version of the congress' topic, translating the Italian version into my own English: „The Body and a Sense of *Boundary*“. I prefer „boundary“ to other possible translations of the Italian „limite“ like „border“ or „limit“. In my interpretation, the lived body is bounded by itself, from its inner side, by its „wisdom“. „Limit“ for me has the connotation of being set up from outside, while „boundary“ has also a quasi-moral connotation.

I think that in sport science this ***inner boundary of the lived body*** is a great field yet to be studied, denoted and respected.¹⁷ Humans possess the „wisdom“ of the lived body, but the *crux* is, that it is *preconscious*. We do have valid feelings and judgements about what is good for us or not, healthy or unhealthy. But how can we communicate about those preconscious capacities and abilities *of or in* our lived body? **We simply must try.**

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- ¹ Shilling, Chris (Ed.): *Embodying Sociology: Retrospect, Progress and Prospects*. Malden, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell 2007; Turner, Bryan S.: *The Body & Society. Explorations in Social Theory*. Los Angeles et al.: Sage 2008.
- ² Gugutzer, Robert (Ed.): *body turn. Perspektiven der Soziologie des Körpers und des Sports*. Bielefeld: transcript 2006, p.9.
- ³ Wedemeyer-Kolwe, Bernd: „Der neue Mensch“. *Körperkultur im Kaiserreich und in der Weimarer Republik*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 2004.
- ⁴ This was the name of the 1933 newly put up department „K“ in the Reichs-ministry for education. The nazis admittedly also used other terms like „politische Leibeserziehung“ (i.e. political physical education) or „Reichs-sportkommissar / -führer“, but following their „Führer“ Hitler, who already 1926 in „Mein Kampf“ (part 2, p.452) demanded to breed *bodies* of rude health („Heranzüchten kerngesunder Körper“) as main goal of education, they increasingly used the term „Körper“ to name the field of physical education and sport.
- ⁵ Kamper, Dietmar & Wulf, Christoph (Hrsg.): *Die Wiederkehr des Körpers*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1982.
- ⁶ Poland, Warren S.: *Problems of collegial learning in psychoanalysis: Narcissism and curiosity*. Paper written and submitted for the IPA Congress 2009 in Chicago. Internet: <<http://internationalpsychoanalysis.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/keynote-poland-rev.pdf>> (26.11.2009)
- ⁷ Bernett, Hajo: „Faschisierung des Körpers‘ – eine Fiktion.“ In: *Spectrum der Sportwissenschaften* 5 (1993), issue 1, S. 68-75.
- ⁸ Goltermann, Svenja: *Körper der Nation. Habitusformierung und die Politik des Turnens 1860 - 1890*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1998.
- ⁹ Gugutzer: *body turn*, p.11.
- ¹⁰ Gugutzer: *body turn*, pp.10-11.
- ¹¹ Cf. footnote 1.
- ¹² Tiedemann, Claus: „Sport (and culture of physical motion) for historians, an approach to make the central term(s) more precise.“ in: Teja, Angela & Krüger, Arnd & Riordan, James K. (Eds.): *Sport and Cultures. Proceedings of the 9th International Congress of the European Committee for Sport History (CESH) Kroton Italy 26 - 29 September 2004*. Vol. II. Croton: Edizioni del Convento 2005, 410-416.
- ¹³ Klein, Gabriele: „Körper- und Bewegungspraktiken im Sport der Moderne.“ In: Weis, Kurt & Gugutzer, Robert (eds.): *Handbuch Sportsoziologie*. Schorndorf: Hofmann 2008, 257-265, p. 257.
- ¹⁴ Cf. footnote 6.
- ¹⁵ Cf. my website with some definitions of central terms: <<http://www.sportwissenschaft.uni-hamburg.de/>>
- ¹⁶ Alkemeyer, Thomas et al. (eds.): *Ordnung in Bewegung. Choreographien des Sozialen. Körper in Sport, Tanz, Arbeit und Bildung*. Bielefeld: transcript 2009; for Shilling and Turner see footnote 1.
- ¹⁷ Cf. Müller-Koch, Uta: „Körperlichkeit, Glück und Sport - philosophische Perspektiven.“ In: *Sportwissenschaft* 37 (2007), vol. 1, pp. 38-51.